

The State as Faction: Mao's Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976

Frank Dikötter; Bloomsbury Press, London, New York; 2016

396 pages; Rs 599/-

ISBN: HB978-1-4088-5649-9

ISBN: TPB 978-1-4088-5650-5

In the summer of 1966, a brewing power struggle within the CCP took a sharp turn for the worse. The struggle was preceded by severe differences on the Great Leap Forward (1958-61); and the crisis in the international communism occasioned by Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU in February 1956. Following intense conflicts over economic policy, exacerbated by faction, whim and doctrine, Party Chairman Mao Zedong unleashed a popular movement on culture, education and ideology in 1965-66. This state-enabled intrusion involved hooligan-like behaviour by millions of school and college-going students, soon to be known as Red Guards; joined at certain moments by factory workers and soldiers.

Seemingly a mass movement for defending socialism from bureaucratic degeneration and for pursuing a correct socialist line, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) resulted in a near-total collapse of orderly governance and the necessity of martial law in most provinces. Mass violence and the spread of disease resulted in between 400,000 to 3 million deaths; and in 1971 Mao had to face the ignominy of a military coup by his anointed successor Defence Minister Lin Biao. Dikotters' treatise is a finely grained account of the GPCR, with details of inner-Party intrigue as well as the barbarities inflicted upon ordinary Chinese citizens by Mao's activists.

The Hundred Flowers and the Great Leap

Following Khrushchev's speech, China had witnessed a period of relaxation of state control during the Hundred Flowers Bloom campaign of 1956-57. This had backfired, with a mounting barrage of criticism emanating from within and without the Party by those who took seriously its exhortation to speak freely. In the late 1950's, Deng Xiaoping; and in the mid '60's President Liu Shaoqi, his wife, and Beijing's Mayor Peng Zhen had led the counter attack against popular and intellectual dissent. However, the apparatus was itself riven by serious differences and its attempt at controlling mass discontent was complicated by various factors. These included the paranoia caused by developments in the USSR, including the removal of Khrushchev in 1964 (which made Mao very uneasy) and criticisms directed against him by revolutionary veterans such as Marshal Peng Dehuai who had criticised the Great Leap Forward as early as 1959.

The Great Leap Forward is now considered one of the twentieth century's worst man-made disasters. Dikotter himself has written about it (*Mao's Great Famine: The History Of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62*; Bloomsbury UK, 2010); and so has historian Yang Jisheng (*Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*; 2008, English version Penguin, 2012). Based on Chinese official sources, these studies put the estimated number of 'unnecessary deaths' at 45 million. The aftermath of this calamity was felt in the Party, wherein the need for Mao to share the blame was repeatedly warded off via factional intrigue. In 1962, after some conciliatory gestures, Mao obtained the replacement of Peng as Defense Minister by Lin Biao; along with the launch of a 'socialist education campaign.'

But the murmuring continued. By 1965 Mao clearly threatened, distrusting especially the senior Party leaders who were leading the rectification campaigns, and in so doing, strengthened their control over the apparatus. At this point the Chairman sought to deploy 'the masses' in his factional interest. The Mao cult which emerged in the early 1960's was a manifestation of an 'inner party struggle'. The Little Red Book was compiled in 1964, when Lin Biao undertook massive indoctrination of the Army. This was augmented by the militarisation of civil society. Discrimination based on 'class background' became a norm, establishing the CPC's doctrine of the inter-generational transfer of guilt. The model for the GPCR's control of young minds was the posthumous cult of the young soldier Lei Feng; whose diaries were a record of devotion, including descriptions of dreams in which he saw Chairman Mao stroking his head and asking him to 'be forever loyal to the Party, to the people.' Dikotter describes Lei Feng as 'an invention of the propaganda department.' In 1963, Mao exhorted China's youth to 'learn from Lei Feng.'

The 'culture' in the Cultural Revolution needs decoding. This, after all, was a polity in which free debate was frowned upon and finally criminalised. Combined with the Leninist principle of the Party being the sole repository of truth ('the Party is Always Right'), this meant that differences over serious matters of policy and accountability could not be expressed except via allegory. Plays about medieval court intrigue could be interpreted as pointers to contemporary events; and a playwright could be attacked for counter-revolutionary content because his script upset the Chairman. It all depended upon interpretation, which in turn depended upon power. If the Party is always right, everything from the correct version of Marxism-Leninism to the proper interpretation of a play and the determination of accountability depends upon who controls the central echelons of the Party.

Thus it was that in 1966, allegations of alien class interests having infiltrated the party began to be aired, and a Cultural Revolution Group set up, which included Mao's wife Jiang Qing, and the veteran Kang Sheng who had learned the art of ideological policing in Moscow from Stalin's hatchet man Nikolai Yezhov during the 1930's. A poster war was

instigated in schools and universities, and millions of students inducted into the factional warfare at the behest of the Chairman himself. Notions of struggle against class enemies, feudalism, revisionists, capitalist-roaders, etc became common currency. All this was taking place with the backing of the most powerful man in China – no matter that he was shortly to discover that it was easier to mount a tiger than dismount it.

Red Terror

Chapters 6 and 7, 'Red August' and 'Destroying the Old World' describe the violence unleashed at the behest of the Cultural Revolution Group; a frenzy of lawlessness, with people being assaulted and even murdered without any semblance of legality. In schools and colleges across China, children were encouraged to identify and persecute so-called class enemies. Very soon this came to include their peers and teachers, family members, litterateurs, artists – anyone could be targeted for incorrect ideas; for a bad class background. Hundreds of thousands were denounced, humiliated, beaten, tortured and killed. Thus:

A wave of violence engulfed the capital after the rally on Tiananmen Square. At the Beijing Third Girls Middle School, the principal was beaten to death. The dean hanged herself. At another middle school... the principal was ordered to stand under the hot sun while Red Guards poured boiling water over him. New depths of horror were plumbed at another middle school... as a biology teacher was knocked to the ground, beaten and dragged by her legs through the front door and down the steps, her head bumping against the concrete. She died after being further tormented for several hours. Then the other teachers... were forced to take turns and beat her dead body. At elementary schools, where the students were no older than thirteen, some teachers were made to swallow nails and excrement, others had their heads shaved and were forced to slap each other... The Red Guards also turned against some of their schoolmates. For years they had harboured deep resentment of students from bad family backgrounds... Only two years earlier the Chairman had voiced his opposition to an education system he viewed as dangerously meritocratic, demanding that admission of children from 'exploiting families' be limited... The Red Guards now craved a system of permanent discrimination. They were born red, their enemies were born black. Students from bad class backgrounds were locked up, forced to carry out heavy labour... humiliated and sometimes tortured to death.

In Daxing county near Beijing, some 300 members of landlord families, including children and old people were beaten to death or electrocuted. By late September, 1770 people had been lynched in Beijing alone (78-9). Thousands of families of 'bad class backgrounds' were evicted from their homes. The informal economy of hawkers, artisans and makers of traditional objects was decimated. Vast amounts of plastic, paper and aluminium were diverted to the production of Red Books and badges. What comes across is a reign of terror,

unfolding in barely controlled waves, whereby Mao's faction endeavoured to terrorise and eliminate all their rivals, real or imagined in an unbridled struggle for supreme power.

The simple rule for the young rebels was to destroy everything belonging to the old order. Shops catering to fashion or hair-styling, were vandalised and shut down, cremations were now deemed to replace burial, cemeteries of foreigners or of 'feudal elements' were desecrated. The cemetery of Confucius' family was raided, corpses dug up and hanged. Lin Biao's praise in late August 1966 intensified the violence:

Now that the army had given them full licence to turn the old world upside down, the Red Guards went on the rampage. Libraries were easy targets, as they worked their way through the stacks, in schools and on campuses, confiscating every volume that looked even vaguely feudal or bourgeois. Book burnings were common... In Shanghai, Red Guards destroyed thousands of books from the Zikawei Library, a scholarly repository of over 200,000 volumes started by Jesuits in 1847... In the Huangpu district...several lorries were working around the clock to take books to the local paper mill for pulping (83-84)

Cathedrals, mosques, pagodas, monuments and libraries were systematically violated. Porcelain and bronze artifacts, paintings and manuscripts were looted – some ended up in the collections of the Cultural Revolution Group, mainly Kang Shen and Madame Mao – the rest left to rot. The destruction of Buddhist manuscripts and sacred places in Tibet has been documented by Tsering Woesser, in *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution*; (Locus Publishing, Taiwan, 2006)

The countryside

In 1964, Mao had launched a propaganda campaign named Learn from Dazhai – asking people to emulate the habits of self-reliance of a village by that name. Characteristic of the voluntarism of the Great Leap Forward, the campaign stressed the power of manual labour to overcome the lack of state assistance. It resulted in projects to fill water-lands, cut forests, build earthworks, drain lakes etc. Often assisted by the PLA, most of these resulted in acute deforestation, damage to wild life, and depletion of fish harvests and natural water resources.

However, the GPCR's focus was on urban areas and their hinterland. Vast swathes of rural China were bereft of governance due not only to the political turmoil - 'the state had simply melted away' (224); but also due to a pragmatic awareness that an attempt to repeat the Great Leap would disrupt food supply. Peasants used the opportunity to overturn past collectivist policies. A black market in timber, vegetable, coal and petty commodities flourished. In Dikotters' words:

Like the Great Leap Forward, the campaign to Learn from Dazhai was a gigantic exercise in deception. Dazhai itself was a sham, its model villagers the reluctant actors in a play written by the Chairman. The miracle harvests were fake, obtained by inflating the figures and borrowing grain from other villages. The People's Liberation Army built much of the irrigation system. Far from being self-reliant, Dazhai received huge subsidies and other forms of aid from the state. What happened in Dazhai was replicated throughout the country, as vast amounts of labour, energy and capital were lavished on showcase projects... (231)

He quotes a scholar of the campaign: 'Rarely has there been a historical moment in which political repression, misguided ideals, and an absolutist vision of priorities and correct methods coincided to achieve such concentrated attacks on nature, environmental destruction, and human suffering.' (Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Dikoter returns to a similar theme in chapter 22, 'The Second Society', which describes an intellectual counter-culture involving clandestine printing, reading and circulation of books, music and art and a refusal to accept the totalising demands of the Party. We are left in no doubt that a majority of the population heartily detested the impact of the GPCR upon their daily lives.

Militarization

The militant atmosphere of the GPCR also coincided with increasing tension with the USSR. The clashes along the Ussuri River in March 1969 resulted in hundreds of casualties, which Mao used to ratchet up the civil warlike situation at home. The Ninth Party Congress in April marked his victory in his effort to overturn the revisionist turn of the Eighth Congress of 1956 that had reversed forced collectivization and removed references to Mao Zedong Thought. The Ninth Congress also saw Defence Minister Lin Biao being elevated to the position of Mao's formal successor; and a strong military presence in the newly elected Central Committee.

The path toward a complete militarization of the polity was now open. It was accompanied by the Third Front, a campaign for an industrial infrastructure in China's interior. This reached an apogee in the period of Lin's domination over the GPCR; and constituted the its main economic policy. The climate of impending apocalypse led to massive waste:

Several economists have calculated that the Third Front cost the country hundreds of billions in forgone output alone, as the high priority of the Third Front starved other parts of the country of much-needed investment. It is probably the biggest example of wasteful capital allocation made by a one-party state in the twentieth century. In terms of economic development, it was a disaster second only to the Great Leap Forward. (218)

Chapter 19 – ‘Fall of an Heir’ deals with Mao’s suspicions of Lin’s growing control over the economy and party during 1969-71. The crisis was partly engendered by Liu’s death in custody and the need for a new head of state. The other aspect was the emergence of a faction that believed in the US being a lesser enemy, and the need to counter the Soviet threat by a turn to the USA. Mao favoured the latter approach, Lin the former. For their part, Nixon and Kissinger also needed Chinese mediation to help them deal with Soviet animus and the Vietnamese quagmire.

By mid 1971, the rapprochement was made public. This was around the same time that Lin’s son planned a coup that was probably known to Mao. On September 13, 1971, Lin and his family attempted to flee to the USSR in an inadequately fuelled aircraft that crashed in Mongolia. Thereafter, despite the global brouhaha occasioned by the Sino-US rapprochement, Mao went into decline, his avowed brilliance proven to be a chimera. Why, asked many people, should they believe in the Chairman when his chosen successor did not? Lin’s fall marked the symbolic end of the GPCR.

The silence of the lambs

The surreal nature of the GPCR became apparent in the last year of Mao’s life. The earthquake that struck Tangshan in July 28, 1976, resulted in over half a million deaths. Amidst this catastrophe, some neighbourhood committees were still exhorting the population to ‘criticise Deng Xiaoping and carry the Cultural Revolution through to the end.’ The insensitivity of the authorities caused widespread anger; and as Dikotter says: ‘Natural catastrophes, according to imperial tradition, are harbingers of dynastic change... Mao felt the quake, which rattled his bed, and must have understood the message.’ (312).

Things changed rapidly after Mao’s death – the Gang of Four was quickly arrested, and Deng Xiaoping’s rise was rapid. But Dikotter reminds us that:

Real change was driven from below. In a silent revolution dating back at least a decade, cadres and villagers had started pulling themselves out of poverty by reconnecting with the past....In the winter of 1982–3, the people’s communes were officially dissolved... covert practices that had spread across the countryside in the last years of the Cultural Revolution now flourished, as villagers returned to family farming... established privately owned shops or went to the cities...The private entrepreneurs who transformed the economy were millions upon millions of ordinary villagers, who effectively outmanoeuvred the state. If there was a great architect of economic reform, it was the people... Deng Xiaoping used economic growth to consolidate the communist party and maintain its iron grip on power. But it came at a cost. Not only did the vast majority of people in the countryside push for greater economic opportunities, but they also escaped from the ideological shackles

imposed by decades of Maoism. The Cultural Revolution in effect destroyed the remnants of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought... The very ideology of the party was gone, and its legitimacy lay in tatters. The leaders lived in fear of their own people, constantly having to suppress their political aspirations. (321-22)

The GPCR was yet another example of the totalitarian impulse, the open secret that motivates all ideological dictatorships: the desire to quell the dignity of the human spirit, to replace thoughtful speech by politically sponsored chatter. The Red Guards' cacophonous adulation for the Great Helmsman was a vent for their most base instincts: this state-enabled rampage represented not a hundred flowers in bloom, but the spread of a single fungus rooted in silence. As the Chairman lapsed into speechlessness (the last phase of his illness was marked by a near total speech defect), so did the cadres of the GPCR. All that remained was what he too was after: untrammelled power. But where he sought to clothe it in ideological rhetoric, the Chinese people's disgust now made that impossible. The brutal military suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989 was designed, as the author says, 'to send a signal that still pulsates to this day: do not query the monopoly of the one-party state'. (322).

The questions raised by this history are sobering. The events of the 1960's remind us of the deep-rooted authoritarian streak in Chinese politics – it was not always like that, so what happened? It should also make us reflect upon the place of law and lawful governance in ideocratic regimes. What happens when the distinction between legal and illegal (or extra legal) violence disappears -and moreover is actively sought to be abolished by a single-party regime? When the state itself promotes violence and hooliganism? Is it not a sobering reflection that a realistic analysis of the GPCR and its psychological impulses reminds us more of Nazi storm-troopers than a movement for social betterment?

Both China and the world need to study and remember it. Dikotter's book is a valuable contribution to Chinese history as well as to the history of ideas.

Dilip Simeon is a historian, writer and public intellectual based in Delhi